

On Veterans' Day, Taps for the American Dream

By David H. Hackworth

VETERANS DAY has always had a special meaning for the millions of American men and women who have served their country—a day for remembrance, tribute and summing up.

This year tens of thousands of new veterans take their place beside those of Concord, New Orleans, Shiloh, the Marne, Normandy, the Chosin Reservoir, Tuyhoa and a score of other military actions. I was in the Persian Gulf, reporting for Newsweek, and I proudly watched our young men and women do their stuff like old pros. They were dedicated, selfless and courageous. They made me feel reassured about being an American, because they represented everything noble and fine about our country.

Yet I, like many veterans today, wonder whether our country is better off now than it was at that memorable time 40 years ago when, triumphant in the last worldwide shooting war, we confidently engaged in a worldwide political war. Today the cynical among us ask: "What did we fight for? We won the Cold War and lost our nation!"

In 1950, America was on top of the world. We led in everything—from quality, made-in-USA products to strong values that enriched our families, schools and houses of worship. Our government, business, religious and educational leaders were straight and took responsibility for their actions. Our banks and dollars were strong. Our streets were clean and safe. Our children could read and write and were as bright as new moons, full of innovations and ideas. All one had to do was roll up his sleeves and work hard. The country was far from perfect; race relations in particular were a disgrace. But the future was never header.

Today our governments are rocked with scandal from the White House to city halls. No one is responsible. So the S&L and BCCI megabuck white-collar holdups, Keating 5 affairs, the deficit disasters blow across the land like autumn leaves to be raked up by the average American—whose standard of living gets lower as his taxes go higher. Our children's inheritance is looking empty and sick. Teenagers are shooting it out in the streets with automatic

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weapons. Condoms have replaced prayer in our schools, and drugs have replaced hope in our youth. Our education system is bankrupt and produces new-age morons who are high-tech illiterates. Many of our children can't write, spell or add.

Our economy, still the richest in the world despite all the bungling, sputters like a rusted-out car on the crumbling shoulder of our fast lanes. America's wealth and future have been plundered with the reckless arrogance of a two-bit dictator, and greed rules the land. Our banks are melting down, and the rich buy new tax shelters like they buy lawmakers. Members of Congress ask not what they can do for their country, but what they can do for themselves through PACs, perks and ripoffs. The lobbyists stoke the politicians' fire with money, and these chosen representatives of the people turn their heads away from the nation's needs and instead focus on their own urgent business: the next election, prestige, power and me, me.

Oliver North, Richard Secord and John Poindexter, graduates of our sacred Duty, Honor and Country military academies, shred the Constitution they swore to defend and

become heroes to the looneytuners. The Pentagon deceives our citizens with chants of more bombs, bombers and bullets so we won't be gobbled up by some bogeyman dreamed up by the CIA. Defense contractors have made life's "military-industrial complex" come true. They have stolen our national treasure, skewed our industrial base and wasted much of our nation's talent building bombs and tanks instead of building America. Meanwhile, our congressional watchdogs have jumped into bed with these crooks and are licking their faces for reelection dollars instead of sending them to jail.

Washington globetrotter George Bush sends our armed forces to stop aggression in the Persian Gulf but won't take action to stop aggression in America's streets. In the Gulf War, which made as little military sense as the invasion of poor Panama, there were few winners. One of the big losers was America's freedom of the press. Our reporters were denied free access to our warriors so they couldn't report what they saw and were forced instead to regurgitate what the Pentagon fed them, leaving the public to believe that it was a good war: bloodless, laser-clean and antiseptic.

The Gulf War was about oil, but two primary consumers failed to send troops. While we kept the oil pumping into Japan and Germany, they were continuing to bust our chops in the industrial arena. While we defend their lands, they sandbag on defense spending and put their money into research and development to zap us in the technology race.

When John Sununu flies to the dentist and collects stamps in his flashy limo, the taxpayer picks up the tab. A yuppie political operator, at 31, leaves the White House inner circle to cash in as the Washington hit man for an Arab oil sheik. While Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert talk God and redemption, they steal and sleaze and ask for understanding with the same repentance and regret as Teddy Kennedy and Alan Simpson. Michael Milken is viewed by many as a big Wall Street Robin Hood instead of a cheap hood who stole big.

Immigrant Arnold Schwarzenegger, a role model of violence, drives a \$130,000 Army Humvee, so immigrant Liz Taylor, an icon of illusion and instant gratification, wants one too. In their Desert Storm toys, they'll drive on past the homeless, hungry and dispossessed, the walking wounded of every big city street in America. The cost of one Humvee would care for many of the "wretched refuse"

from our kinder, gentler America. Meanwhile, our veterans' hospitals are filled with human wreckage, eagerly dispatched to our wars but disclaimed upon their return.

A Navy officer recently wrote me: "Something has happened to our country. It seems that those who lie, cheat and steal are rewarded and those that do not have more difficulties than they can imagine." Well, young ensign, you're dead right. People don't feel like they have the capacity to turn things around anymore, and their lives are going down the tubes. The working stiffs have been down so long that they have forgotten how to look up. Many just shrug when they're reminded that one of every seven Americans lives below the poverty line and that decent medical care can only be obtained by Gold Card holders. We've got our own Third World nation right here in the USA, sandwiched between affluent Beverly Hills and posh Fifth Avenue.

The citizens know the system doesn't benefit the people; it benefits the special interests groups. As a result, many Americans have forgotten they have a rightful place in the running of our government. Yet there is a change blowing in the wind. I feel it wherever I travel. Revolutionary dissatisfaction is cutting across America like a cold wind—and we felt the first strong gust Tuesday out of Pennsylvania. A revolt is in the making.

The people are fed up hearing that they're in the promised land when they know they're smack in the middle of the grapes of wrath. They want leadership that will lead by example, not by poll results, sound bites and warm-and-fuzzy points of light. They're telling us on the streets to get rid of the bums in government that have corrupted America, just like the Soviet people are tossing out their users and abusers.

As we celebrate this Veterans Day and perhaps blame other nations for the conditions that have withered America, we should first look in the mirror and face the guilty party: ourselves. We have forgotten the admonition often attributed to Thomas Jefferson: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." We slept, shrugged and were too busy to protect that for which we fought. It's not too late to get America back on track. It's time to get involved, time to wake up. All we have to do is get cracking, sound off and once again stand tall and be responsible for the security of this great republic.